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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and
Department Operations
Room 1301, Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-6001

(202) 225-2171

August 11, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C., 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We write to thank you for your work to ensure that low-income Americans have the support they need to put food on their tables, both during the pandemic and beyond. As Members of the House Agriculture Committee's Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations, we support USDA's undertaking to make certain that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), our nation's largest and most successful anti-hunger program, is up-to-date and reflective of the latest science and data available.

As you know, on March 3, 2021, the Biden-Harris Administration and USDA announced that the Department had begun the process of updating the Thrifty Food Plan – a calculation of the minimum cost of a healthy diet, on which SNAP benefits are based – to better reflect the cost of food and healthy eating today.¹ This update, the first in fifteen years, was required by the strongly bipartisan 2018 Farm Bill – the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334), which mandated that USDA reevaluate the Thrifty Food Plan “by 2022 and every five years thereafter” based on “current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance.”

Reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan is a critically important step towards ensuring that SNAP benefits adequately support a nutritious diet. Every day, SNAP bolsters the food security of more than 42 million Americans, more than 88 percent of whom faced one or more barrier to achieving a healthy diet prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.² Unfortunately, research shows that,

¹ <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/03/03/biden-harris-administrations-actions-reduce-food-insecurity-amid>

² <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/barriers-constrain-adequacy-snap-allotments>; <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/barriers-constrain-adequacy-snap-allotments>

while SNAP reduces food insecurity and improves health outcomes for recipients, benefits are too low to fully meet their nutritional needs.³ A recent study by the Urban Institute found that SNAP does not cover the cost of a low-income meal in 96 percent of U.S. counties, with both urban and rural counties among those with the highest disparities.⁴ Further, an analysis of USDA data found that SNAP households ate significantly less healthily in the last 10 days of their monthly benefit cycle, when they are most likely to run out of assistance; a number of studies have also shown that caloric intake for SNAP recipients decreases dramatically in the final days of their benefit cycle.⁵

The inadequacy of SNAP benefits is due in no small part to the four previous updates to the Thrifty Food Plan being held cost-neutral. As a result, while the Thrifty Food Plan has changed to reflect changing nutrition guidance, the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan not changed, except for adjustments for inflation, for more than sixty years. This is despite massive changes in Americans' dietary patterns, our understanding of nutrition science, and our food system itself, as well as substantial and growing evidence that the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan is inadequate to support a nutritious diet. Therefore, we strongly believe that the USDA's ongoing Thrifty Food Plan reevaluation should not be cost-neutral.

We look forward to seeing the results of USDA's work to reevaluate the Thrifty Food Plan, as directed by the bipartisan 2018 Farm Bill, and encourage you to adjust SNAP benefits to reflect your findings as soon as practicable. Our family, friends, and neighbors in need, many of whom are still struggling to recover from the dire economic and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, deserve no less. Thank you again for your dedication to this important work, and for your tireless commitment to "do right and feed everyone."

Sincerely,



Jahana Hayes
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and
Department Operations

³ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/measuring-effect-snap-food-security>;

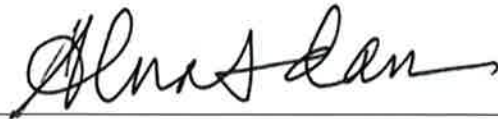
https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/SNAP_report_final_nonembargo.pdf

⁴ <https://www.urban.org/does-snap-cover-cost-meal-your-county>

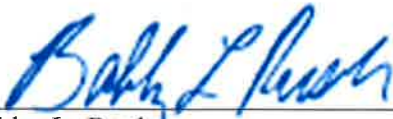
⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749379718317343>



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



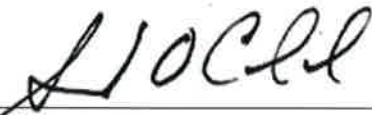
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